

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 BANGKO 15242 290048Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 15242

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SREF, LA, TH, CB, VS

SUBJECT: REFUGEES

1. IN THE COURSE OF A CALL ON THE MINISTER OF INTERIOR BOONTHENG THONGSWASDI TODAY, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO DISCUSS THE REFUGEE PROBLEM AT SOME LENGTH. THE UPSHOT OF THE CONVERSATION WAS THAT THE RTG IS MOST ANXIOUS TO RECEIVE ASSISTANCE FROM THE UNHCR AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AND THE MINISTER REQUESTED THAT THE UNITED STATES MAKE AN EARLY CONTRIBUTION TO THE UNHCR IN ORDER TO ASSURE THE TIMELY ARRIVAL OF UNHCR SUPPORT.

2. THE MINISTER OF INTERIOR RAISED THE SUBJECT OF REFUGEES BY EMPHASIZING THAT IT WAS THE POLICY OF THE RTG TO URGE ALL REFUGEES TO RETURN TO THEIR HOMELANDS. THE GOVERNMENT WISHED TO AVOID CREATING LONG RANGE PROBLEMS BY HAVING LARGE FOREIGN POPULATION GROUPS IN THAILAND. HE STRESSED THE "TEMPORARY" NATURE OF THE ASSISTANCE WHICH REFUGEES WOULD NEED IN THIS COUNTRY. IT WAS CLEAR FROM HIS PRESENTATION, HOWEVER, THAT HE RECOGNIZED THAT FEW, IF ANY, REFUGEES WOULD BE RETURN-
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 BANGKO 15242 290048Z

ING TO LAOS, CAMBODIA OR VIETNAM.

3. IN REPLY TO QUESTIONS, THE MINISTER STATED THAT THE ARRANGEMENTS WHICH THE RTG HOPES TO MAKE WITH THE UNHCR WILL BE DISCUSSED AT THE CABINET ON JULY 29, AFTER WHICH HE HOPES UNHCR WILL PROVIDE AN INITIAL INCREMENT OF \$500,000. THE MINISTER STATED THAT HE HOPED THE UNITED STATES WOULD BE GENEROUS IN SUPPORTING THE UNHCR IN THIS PROGRAM AND WOULD MAKE FUNDS AVAILABLE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. I STATED THAT THE UNITED STATES HAD EXPRESSED ITS WILLINGNESS IN PRINCIPLE TO ASSIST THAILAND IN REFUGEE RELIEF BUT NOTED THAT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO US TO BE INFORMED REGARDING THE PROPOSED SCOPE OF THE PROGRAM AND OF THE ROLE WHICH THE RTG AND FOREIGN DONOR COUNTRIES MIGHT PLAY. I STRESSED THAT THERE WERE SOME ASPECTS SUCH AS WELL DIGGING AND ROAD CONSTRUCTION WHICH THE THAI WERE BEST QUALIFIED TO PERFORM.

4. HAVING BECOME INCREASINGLY CONCERNED OVER CONDITIONS IN THE CAMPS, AND PARTICULARLY AT NAN WHERE APPROXIMATELY 12,000 MEO ARE NOW CAMPED, I EXPLORED THE POSSIBILITY OF SOME RAPID ACTION THROUGH VOLUNTARY AGENCIES. THE MINISTER REPLIED THAT SUCH ACTIVITY WOULD ONLY CONFUSE THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE PROGRAM AND THAT DONOR ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE CONCENTRATED BEHIND THE UNHCR.

5. THE MINISTER COMMENTED THAT GIVEN THE POLICY OF THE GOVERNMENT THAT REFUGEES SHOULD RETURN TO THEIR NATIVE LAND, CONDITIONS IN THE CAMP WOULD INEVITABLY BE AUSTERE IN ORDER NOT TO ATTRACT ADDITIONAL PERSONS FROM NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES. I SAID THAT THIS POLICY WAS UNDERSTANDABLE BUT THAT ACCORDING TO INFORMATION I HAD RECEIVED, THE FOOD AND MEDICAL SUPPORT BEING GIVEN THE REFUGEES WAS INADEQUATE AND I EXPRESSED THE HOPE THAT IT COULD BE INCREASED IN THE NEAR FUTURE. THE MINISTER ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THIS WAS A DILEMMA AND EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE THAT ONCE THE UNHCR PROGRAM WAS UNDERWAY, CONDITIONS IN THE CAMP WOULD IMPROVE.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BANGKO 15242 290048Z

6. COMMENT. IT MAY BE RELEVANT TO NOTE THAT IN THE COURSE OF A VISIT TO CHIANG MAI LAST WEEK-END, I MET WITH ROBERT HEARN, A MEO-SPEAKING FORMER USAID REFUGEE OFFICER IN LAOS, DR. PRADITH WHOM I KNEW WHEN HE HEADED THE LAO MEDICAL STAFF AT THE BAN HOU EI SAI OPERATION BROTHER HOOD HOSPITAL AND A THAI CATHOLIC PRIEST. THEY WERE JUST BACK FROM VISITING

THE MEO REFUGEES IN NAN PROVINCE AND CONFIRM OTHER REPORTS WE HAVE RECEIVED REGARDING THE MISERABLE CONDITIONS WHICH PREVAIL THERE. BASICALLY THE PROBLEMS ARE: VERY INADEQUATE SHELTER, A SERIOUS SHORTAGE OF RICE (RATION IS 250 GRAMS A DAY*), LACK OF OTHER FOOD SUPPLEMENTS, AND A TOTAL LACK OF MEDICAL CARE. ALTHOUGH THE THAI DISTRICT CHIEF IS ACTIVE AND DYNAMIC, HIS LACK OF RESOURCES IS COMPOUNDED BY THE TRADITIONAL CORRUPT PRACTICES IN WHICH HE AND HIS ASSOCIATES ARE ENGAGING.

7. I WAS HEARTENED TO SEE THE URGENCY WITH WHICH THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR IS NOW APPROACHING THE QUESTION OF WORKING OUT A PROGRAM WITH THE UNHCR AND THE MINISTRY'S APPARENT DESIRE TO HAVE ACTION TAKEN PROMPTLY. IN VIEW OF THE DEPLORABLE CONDITIONS NOW PREVAILING IN MANY OF THE CAMPS, THE DEPARTMENT MIGHT WISH TO CONSIDER MAKING AN EARLY NOMINAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE UNHCR TO HELP GET THE PROGRAM STARTED AND PENDING THE PREPARATION BY THE UNHCR OF A BUDGET WHICH WILL INEVITABLY BE DIFFICULT TO ESTABLISH.

8. SINCE DICTATING THE FOREGOING, I WAS VISITED BY MR. GILBERT JAEGER OF UNHCR WHO IS POSTPONING HIS DEPARTURE FROM BANGKOK IN VIEW OF THE RTG ACTION ON THIS MATTER. HE INFORMED ME THAT THE DECISION HAS BEEN MADE TO WITHDRAW MR. USAMAH T. KADRY FROM THAILAND AND TO REPLACE HIM WITH AN EXPERIENCED SWISS REPRESENTATIVE WHO WILL BE ACCOMPANIED BY WERNER BLATTER WHO USED TO REPRESENT THE ICRC IN VIENTIANE. I TOLD MR. JAEGER I WAS DELIGHTED TO GET THIS NEWS. I ALSO GAVE MR. JAEGER A MEMO
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 BANGKO 15242 290048Z

WHICH HAD BEEN GIVEN TO ME IN CHIANG MAI REGARDING

THE SITUATION IN NAN AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE KIND OF PROBLEMS THE UNHCR WOULD CONFRONT AND USED THE MEMO AS A PEG ON WHICH TO HANG A RENEWED PLEA FOR UNHCR REPRESENTATION IN THE AREAS IN WHICH REFUGEES ARE ENCAMPED.
WHITEHOUSE

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